

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan



The legend and lore of holiday plants

For many people, the upcoming holiday season is the most special time of year. It is a period somewhat set apart from daily living and reserved for families, friends and celebrations. Above all, it is a time rich with customs and rituals, where even our simplest holiday decorations, songs and stories are the product of complex legends and myths from numerous countries and religious traditions, curiously blended together, transformed and reinterpreted over thousands of years.

The decorative plants we associate with the holidays are an important part of this cultural evolution, with none more significant than the leaves and boughs of evergreens. Imagine a much earlier time, where as the winter solstice approached, a once bright and fertile world became cold and dark. Fields became barren and seemingly lifeless. As a means to offset this chilling mortal experience, many cultures used cut branches of evergreens to decorate their dwellings and serve as symbols of undying life and continuity. In fact, our popular evergreen wreaths are themselves important representations of this cyclical nature of time and the passage of seasons.

Today, we may "deck our halls with boughs of holly" because it is attractive or traditional, but it is among the most important evergreens used throughout history. For the ancient Romans, holly was sacred to the god Saturn, who is

associated with time and agriculture. Romans celebrating their midwinter Saturnalia exuberantly employed garlands and wreaths of holly.

Druids appreciated the evergreen nature of holly in their midwinter observances, even to the point of recognizing a mythic Holly King, who served as lord of the waning year. In their culture, holly represented masculinity and steadfastness, and was paired with ivy, another evergreen, which was considered feminine — in part owing to misogynistic notions of it being clinging and requiring support, as the two plants were often found together in the

wild. By combining the attributes of holly and ivy in their decorations, Druids believed they could ward off evil spirits.

Christian and pagan traditions combined in the legend of Gawain and the Green Knight, wherein the green knight arrives at King Arthur's court at midwinter brandishing a holly branch. The green knight is beheaded, but survives as a dramatic symbol of resurrection. Moreover, the character is closely connected with ancient and medieval legends of the Green Man, yet another symbol of masculinity and vegetative regeneration, and also related to the Holly King.



Beyond its association with holly, ivy maintains its own significance thanks to the Greek myth of Cissos, a dancing girl whose tireless performance during a feast left her dead at the feet of Dionysus. Cissos was granted immortality by being transformed into the vining plant. Moreover, the Romans knew Dionysus as Bacchus, and ivy was popularly worn as a garland during their Bacchanals in the belief that it would stave off drunkenness.

There is no more complicated and widely used symbol than the Christmas tree. Some accounts attribute the first decorative tree to Nimrod, one of Noah's wayward relations. Druids were known to decorate the Oak of Thor. And Romans probably included evergreen trees along with their other Saturnalia wreaths and garlands.

One of the earliest legends introducing an evergreen tree as a Christmas tree of sorts concerns St. Boniface in the eighth century who had an Oak of Thor cut down and replaced with an evergreen fir. During the Middle Ages, villagers performing mystery plays typically used fir trees decorated with apples to represent the tree in the Garden of Eden. Much later, Martin Luther is attributed with introducing the first lighted Christmas tree, allegedly inspired by seeing stars shining through the branches. The combination of lights and trees follows a convoluted path. Certainly, using lights during the holiday period owes much to the symbolism of a sun god, or the return of light and the rebirth of a dead world. Pagan traditions often involved bonfires and Yule logs, while Christians invoked the Star of Bethlehem. There are also associations connecting tree lighting with Hanukkah, the festival of lights.

The first written record of a Christmas tree places it in Germany in 1605. Later, Charlotte, George III's German wife, is credited with bringing the Christmas tree to England in the 1800s. Afterwards, Victoria and Albert's custom of erecting a Christmas tree in Windsor Castle, complete with cranberry garlands and gingerbread cookie ornaments, led to the widespread appeal of a lighted, decorated tree and traditions throughout Britain and America. The United States also owes much of its Christmas tree observances to the Northern European immigrants who brought their traditions to the New World.

Another popular evergreen with a dizzying pedigree is laurel. The laurel known and used in the classical Mediterranean world is *Lauris nobilis*, always associated with the golden-haired god Apollo. The connection with a sun god had strong appeal for Romans and Greeks busy with midwinter decorating. In northern Europe, branches of cherry laurel were used, also for its evergreen properties, although it is a different species. Adding to the horticultural confusion, Americans further use the term laurel to describe decorative evergreens of many other species, some of which are also called bay laurels or bayberry laurels — which itself is associated with the candleberries or waxberries (actually myrtles) used to scent candles. Once again, one tradition leads to another, from sun gods reflected in evergreens to popular holiday candles, fragrant symbols of light and nature.

Mistletoe enjoys a long and varied history. The "golden bough" of Aeneas was thought to be mistletoe plucked from an oak by the hero entering the

underworld in yet another rebirth myth. The plant, sacred to the Druids, was used to ward off evil spells, cure illness, ensure fertility, bring good luck, and serve as an antidote for poisons. Of course, it is most known for its role in kissing rituals. The Druids admired the plant's mystical properties, as it was commonly found to grow on oak trees, also sacred. Despite no roots to sustain or support it, it remained evergreen. Norse legends attribute the plant's white berries to the tears Frigga shed for her slain son, prior to his resurrection and her creation of a decidedly popular "good luck through kissing ritual." This once again brings us to numerous layers of symbolism found in a single evergreen plant, ranging from resurrection myths to notions of fertility. Early Christians banned the use of mistletoe due to these associations, but the Victorians later gave the ritual another opportunity to adorn the holiday season.

Many other plants continue to play a diverse role in holiday celebrations. Some are ancient, like strewing fragrant branches of the evergreen rosemary upon the floor in winter; others are modern additions like the poinsettia, a Latin American native that plays a holiday role, mostly because of the red and green symbolism. Even purely decorative plants, such as paperwhite narcissus, while they simply provide fragrance and flowers in Occidental homes, have a brighter significance in Chinese dwellings: bulbs planted in midwinter serve as a harbinger of the New Year.

Across time and continents, these plants and many others have continued to play a significant role in world mythology and symbolism, bringing life and color and traces of understanding to both our rituals and our daily lives.



The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

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